

OT: Isaiah 42:1-9

NT: Acts 10:34-43

Gp: Matthew 3:13-17

On Christmas morning I set off to the not especially festive setting of HMP Liverpool, Walton Jail, one of the largest prisons in the country. It was built in the nineteenth century, with small cells, where two or more prisoners are confined, arranged on balconies around a central stairwell. Like many institutions, the prison is a world of its own, with its own culture, customs, language, and hierarchy. In the chapel where I was to take the Christmas morning Church of England service, I was advised that the so-called 'vulnerable' prisoners sat on one side of the aisle, and the rest on the other. The vulnerable prisoners are kept separate from the other inmates, in a different wing, they're vulnerable because their crimes are seen as the most despicable by their fellow prisoners – sexual offences mainly. The little congregation gathered, and we worshipped, and received Jesus on the day of his birth, in the words of the Scripture, in the sacramental bread and wine, and in the fragile community of sinners that was the Church that day.

It's often said that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church, when the disciples received the Holy Spirit, after Christ's Ascension. But today, the Feast of his Baptism, can also lay a claim to be the day when the community he founded began. John the Baptist tells him that he is the last person to need baptism, which symbolised the washing away of sin, with water representing God's grace and mercy. But this simple ritual, repeated so many countless times on every continent and across the centuries, comes to mean something more profound even than the gift of forgiveness. It comes to represent the union of God and humanity which we see revealed in the person of Jesus, and which he invites those who follow him to embody; humanity charged with divinity, otherwise called being 'children of God'.

So I'd invite you today, early in this New Year, to think of this feast as an invitation to ask ourselves, what it means for us to be people who have been 'clothed with Christ'? which is one of the metaphors we're given in the New Testament for being a disciple. Fundamentally, as I hope the prisoners in Walton Jail knew, on Christmas Day, being baptised is a gift we don't deserve, but we're offered it, by God, regardless of who we are and what we have done. His baptism by full immersion into the water of the River Jordan, signifies God diving down into the murky depths of the world, and of our lives, and pulling us free when we're entangled or trapped by things, situations, regrets, or the guilt that can drown us.

Immediately after his baptism Christ is propelled into the desert by the Holy Spirit to be tempted, to face the shadow-side of himself, the will to power, the desire for glory, the appetite to consume for its own sake. And if we are to be the sons and daughters of God we are called to be, we have to face our shadow-side too; we have to acknowledge, every day, that if we live only for ourselves, or

in our own strength, we end up stunted, selfish, impenitent, calloused by sin. But if we're mature enough to acknowledge that in the words of the Prayer Book, we have 'erred and strayed' from the good, 'like lost sheep', then the grace of God is always there to help us to pick ourselves up again, humbled, but wiser, better able to help the people around us to do likewise.

Saint Augustine, reflecting on today's gospel, invites us to consider the man plunged under the water, who is both God and man, the beginning of a new understanding of what it means to be human, opening the doors of eternity, that's the significance of the man being dunked under the water. And then there's another symbol of God too – the dove representing the Holy Spirit. But, Augustine says, the dove is not a symbol of eternal salvation and communion with the heart of God for pigeons. No, the dove, like the water, is a metaphor, for purity, and a reminder of stories of salvation as far back as the dove that brought a branch back to Noah, signifying the end of the great flood. But the man Jesus, is not a metaphor, he is a person, a real living person, both God and man, and because of that historical concrete reality each one of us is living into the mystery of being beloved children of God today, in this life, and in the life of the world to come.

A final thought about the baptism of Christ, as we look to acknowledge God's love and to respond, this year. To the untrained eye all that there was to see was a man lowering another man under the water, and lifting him up, and then a dove flying overhead. Don't expect fireworks in the spiritual life. If you receive moments when you're very aware of God's presence and will, very good. But learn to appreciate that God is there with us in the murkiness, the ordinariness, and especially, the brokenness of our lives. Look for him there and you will find him, opening eyes, leading prisoners out of darkness. Let him take you by the hand, and keep you.

Fr Philip Anderson